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BOYS IN COMPOSITION.

THREE years ago a graduate of Princeton accepted the position of instructor in English in the largest high school for boys in one of our eastern cities. One part of his work was to take charge of the courses in composition, which had necessarily been neglected by the small corps of teachers, who were already overworked with the courses in the history of literature. He found that few of the students could write down their thoughts correctly, and still fewer had any idea of the constructive unity and proportion of an essay. They really had had no training in writing. At long intervals during their first year they had been compelled to hand in short compositions about some book, such as Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales*, or about the life of some author, such as Poe. These compositions were seldom, if ever, corrected, and the student's attention was never called to his errors. It did not take long to discover that the boys were not learning the practical use of their language; for instance, their examination papers were usually collections of disconnected phrases, from which only a skilful interpreter could decipher the meaning.

The instructor determined to experiment with a second-year class, three hundred in number, who came to him once a week for composition. He believed that brief regular practice would teach them to express their ordinary thoughts clearly and concisely. Each week each boy was required to hand in a composition, varying in length from one to six hundred words, according to the subject. The frequency of these compositions required a change in the character of the subjects and the method of selecting them. The old subjects of books and biographies were discarded, because the students did not have time for so much reading. Soon these subjects were entirely forbidden, because the instructor found that such compositions were merely patchworks of extracts, longer or shorter, from the books. Boys would copy entire phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, without

understanding the meaning or appreciating the force of the separate words. They were not able to use the same words in any constructions except those of the book.

The chief value of this note-taking method of teaching composition is supposed to consist in its triple function of giving the student an acquaintance with standard literature, an enriched vocabulary, and the ability to write correct English. In attempting too much, it fails in every part. Few boys find any pleasure in books which they are forced to read for school work. Too often the remark is heard: "I never liked that book; I had to read it in school." The acquaintance with literature which is acquired in school comes chiefly and most effectively from the stimulating interpretation of the teacher. In compositions on books the language is always subordinated to the story. Criticism asks: "Is the outline of the story correct?" and forgets the most important question: "Is it easy to understand the meaning?" It cannot be denied that a boy's vocabulary is enriched, but too often this enrichment is only in bulk and not in usefulness. The aim of a course in composition should be to enable the boys to express themselves clearly and concisely whenever they may have occasion to write of their daily experiences. For this purpose it is better to train them to use skilfully and easily a small vocabulary than merely to increase the extent of their vocabulary, which may always remain clumsy in their hands.

When bookish subjects had been excluded, the instructor urged the boys to describe some familiar objects of their daily life or to narrate some episodes of their experience. His only caution was: "Don't write about things you have read or heard." He would not select subjects for them, for he found that the necessity of choosing subjects increased and sharpened their powers of observation. At first their subjects were too large to be accurately described or narrated in such brief compositions; he found it necessary to insist that they write up the adventures of a single hour or less, rather than of a day in town or a trip to the shore. He urged them to write about "The Mosquito That Bit Me Last Night," rather than about "A Trip to the Zoo;" to write about "A Horse Shying at a Newspaper," rather than a descrip-

tion of the whole street. Acuteness of observation and accuracy of detail were emphasized. The ordinary subject of "My Walk to School" was split up into a dozen subjects: "Why I Walk to School," "The Man That Sells Papers at the Corner," "The Schoolmates I Meet," "The Barking Dog," "The Baby that Smiled," "Always Something Forgotten," etc.

Most of the boys had no trouble in getting subjects; their adventures during the summer were the main supply. Some few fellows reported that they were unable to get subjects, that their experiences "had run out." The instructor would therefore question them about as follows: "So nothing has happened to you worth writing about?" "Nothing that I can think of." "Have you been in any fights lately?" "No." "In any accidents?" "No." "Had any queer dreams?" "None that I remember." "Did you ever hit your thumb nail with a hammer?" "Yes." "Tell me all about it; why you were using the hammer, how you came to make the false blow, how your nail felt, and how long it was sore." Usually a boy would require such help only once. Just before Christmas there came a general complaint about the scarcity of subjects. The usual suggestion was: "Tell me why you ran out of subjects." Many compositions were written on "The Difficulty of Choosing a Subject." The following, which has not been corrected, is quite common in style and matter:

OH! THAT ESSAY!

Well, it is Sunday night and I have nothing to do. One would naturally think if he met any nice girls that day; but like a flash I remember that I have not written that bothersome essay. I seat myself, take up a pen and get a piece of paper, wondering what the nature of my essay shall be. My thoughts go in various channels and then entirely off of essays and I think of trigonometry, german and shorthand. Then I suddenly remember that I forgot my shorthand exercise that I was to copy and wonder what Mr. C—— will say. Then I think of the professors, principally my two particular friends, Messrs. P—— and H——, and then of Prof. M—— and there my mind stays. I can almost see him now instructing F—— in his quiet dignified manner, while F—— looks hard at his book, scratches his shin with his foot and abruptly comes to the conclusion that he does not hear anything that is going on. By! Jove! Here I am thinking of everything but that plagued old essay. The thought so startles me that I begin to shuffle my bare feet

only to bang my big toe with considerable force against the corner of the desk. That makes my eyes water and I might have made the air blue as the man did that went through the room at night and cracked his shins against the side of the bed; but controlling myself I pick up my pen and start to write.

Oh! how long it takes to finish that essay! I almost come to the conclusion that I had better go to bed; but the thought of the *D* (deficient) that I got in literature last term was enough and I managed to finish and with a smile of satisfaction went to bed.

Many of the boys chose as their subjects ordinary daily episodes, and frequently these were intensely interesting—about boating, swimming, sailing, baseball, football. Whenever the school eleven would win, at least one-fourth of the next lot of compositions would describe the game. A large number of other essays were on subjects similar to the following:

A TRIAL OF TOILETTISM.

Have you ever been in a big hurry and in completing your toilet get stuck on your collar or collar-button? If so, I know I have your greatest sympathy.

One evening I was in my room hurrying to complete my dressing, and every now and then replying "all right" to the numerous persuasions to hurry up.

"I'll be down in a couple of minutes," said I, to the 10th, "It's after eight o'clock." Ah! thank heavens that is done; it was the collar, and after a brief struggle I had it on. Surveying myself in the mirror, I gave the collar a few twitches and pulls in order to straighten it, when the collar-button broke.

"Oh, Frank, do hurry up, we are late now," calls up Mother.

"All right I'll be down in a few seconds, get my hat and coat ready!"

Then hurrying to the next room I pull open my brother's drawer and plunging my hand into a neat pile of handkerchiefs, neckties and so forth, I pull out his gold button, which belongs to the set he received from a "petticoat." Not thinking about this or the consequences, I stuck it in my shirt and fastening one side of my collar I start on the other. Walking up and down the floor, with the perspiration rolling down my face. I tried in vain to fasten that collar. This is where your religion forsakes you or rather we forsake our religion.

At last the collar is fastened, and hearing some one coming up the stairs I hastily knot my tie. Just then brother walks in, calling me a lobster, loafer and other pet names. I now had on my vest, but seeing my brother start towards his open drawer, I waited no longer, and catching up my coat, I went for the stairs, falling into it on the way down.

Other boys would write of imaginary experiences, fanciful adventures with their latest girls, queer tramps, outlandish explorations, ridiculous detective work; in fact, it would be difficult to discover a subject which they had not touched, from the palaces of fairyland to the furnaces of hell. One of the very best compositions was written by a little Irishman. For several weeks he had not handed in any compositions, and the instructor reprimanded him. The next week in came a composition which in substance was as follows:

Last night I dreamed I went to hell, and was tried by Satan and a jury of imps. They asked me all sorts of queer questions about things I knew nothing of and finally the jury left the room. Before this I had felt calm, and was satisfying my curiosity by gazing around the wonderful court room. Now I began to fear my sentence. Would they scorch me, pluck out my eyes, starve me, kill me with thirst, hang me up by the feet and beat my soles till the nails drop? I can remember distinctly how the door creaked, when they entered. In a moment I was pronounced guilty. Satan seemed startled. Finally he rose from the bench, with a look of pity on his face that frightened me more than his former malicious looks. He said, as I stood with quaking knees: "Young man, I pity you. Only few mortals have I pitied. But fate compels me to sentence you. Young man . . . I condemn you . . . to write an essay."

This composition gave the hint to other boys, and among the compositions of the following week was this:

A TRIP TO THE CLOUDS IN THE AIR.

It was the same old question which bothers me (and many others in our section), what shall I write for a composition this week?

As I sat in the revolving chair I turned the thoughts over in my mind.

Suddenly the chair started to go around at a great rate, faster than a top goes. It kept going around and up. The ceiling and roof were no obstruction to it, and I was soon among the clouds. Before I had time to look around me, I was seized by a flock of great birds and carried to a hollow in a bank of clouds. The birds had the power of speech and the leader informed me that I was to be tried for intruding on their domains. They formed a court with the leader as judge.

After much chattering, I was convicted and sentenced.

The penalty was to write a composition to be read before the whole court. I was dismayed.

To sentence me so heavily for such a small offense was outrageous.

If they had sentenced me to shovel a few clouds from their front door, I

would not have thought anything of it. But to write a composition! That was awful.

Well, seeing they were not to be turned from their purpose, I said I would attempt it. I found that I had no ink. The leader sent one of the birds to get some, and he returned from the earth with an oyster shell full of water from our city hydrant! As I had no pen, one of the birds plucked a quill from his body and gave it to me. I had some old scraps of paper in my pocket, and started to write on them. I had just finished about two words when a gust of wind blew the paper away. I tried to snatch it, but I fell over the edge of the cloud and into space.

I landed on my back, and awoke to find that I had turned the chair up too far, and it had fallen over, and landed me on my back.

Rarely, however, was the instructor wearied with many compositions on the same subject. When some event of school importance had interested all the students, the majority of the compositions were upon it. The most wearisome lot of compositions came to him one bright morning in May. He had excused the class from handing in compositions during that month, but twice he gave them subjects to write up during the recitation hour. One beautiful May morning, when all the world, even the busy city, seemed to him to be happy, and he hoped the boys too were happy, he tried to give them the least wearying subject. So he asked them to write about "The Most Pleasant Experience of My Life." The next morning, which was just as beautiful and bright, upon examining them, he was astonished and overpowered to find that nine-tenths of the compositions were on "A Day at the Shore." He planned revenge. One week later he gave the class the subject: "The Hardest Thing I Ever Did." At the end of the hour he received 218 compositions, and every one was far above the average in worth. He had forgotten that pleasure is vague, but pain definite.

No two of these compositions were alike in style or treatment, although some of them were on the same subjects. For instance, thirty-three boys wrote of adventures and work on farms, nineteen on rowing, eighteen on composition-writing. However, seventy-two separate subjects could be distinguished. Two boys who did not know each other, and who could not have communicated, started their compositions with the following statement: "The hardest thing I ever did was to act as pall-

bearer at my grandmother's funeral, for she was so heavy." One little Hebrew wrote that the hardest thing he ever did was to lose a quarter which his mother had given him. In his glee he tossed it up in the kitchen, but unfortunately it hit the ceiling and bounced out of the window into a pile of logs. He worked hard until he pulled the logs off, but even then he could not find the money in the chips, pieces of bark, and mold. So he came into the kitchen and began to cry; but his mother gave him another quarter. A small, red-headed, bashful boy surprised the instructor very much by saying that the hardest thing he ever did was trying to teach a girl to swim; she would not wet her bathing suit. Another beau could remember nothing harder than waiting for his girl to come down to the parlor. Another thought the hardest thing was to stay away from the theater to study; his friend, however, said it was harder to have to study after coming home from the play.

The compositions could be roughly classified into six groups. It was not surprising that just before the final examinations one-third of the class, or seventy-five boys, should be worrying over school work. Only one-sixth of the class, or thirty-seven boys, wrote about sports, probably because, though "some sports are painful," yet "their labor delight in them sets off." At first glance it was astonishing to find that one-seventh of the class of city boys, or thirty-three, wrote on farm work. The truth is that many of the schoolboys spend their summers on farms, where they attempt to perform certain manual tasks for which their physical strength and training are inadequate. Twenty-two worked in stores during the summer and complained of the confinement on the hot days when they wished to loaf in the park or to go swimming. Twenty-six boys thought the hardest work of their lives was about the house, putting up awnings, beating carpets, and so forth. Only fourteen were so much interested in themselves that they wrote of their personal habits, such as getting awake in the morning, being prompt at meals. The remaining eleven compositions could not be classified, ranging in subjects from "Killing a Dog" to "Singing a Solo."

Upon a similar occasion the instructor asked a class of thirty-

eight boys to write a complaint about something in connection with the school, to give their reasons, and to suggest remedies. Twenty different grievances were supported by such good reasons that fourteen of them have since been redressed by faculty action, and three more are now awaiting consideration.

The method of correcting and criticising the compositions varied according to the size of the class. A small class of twenty-five was most satisfactory to work with. Each Monday morning their compositions were collected, and on the last hour on Friday, when all of the boys were tired of the ordinary routine, they came to the instructor, and he read the compositions aloud to them, one after another, as fast as possible. In this hour he attempted to lessen the distance between students and teacher by urging them to criticise and comment upon the compositions themselves. For the first three weeks the class made few criticisms. The instructor then began to read out faulty sentences and ask particular boys to criticise them. Soon the better part of the criticisms came from the class. If an interesting composition was read, they would listen quietly without comment. If the subject was old and familiar without any novel, redeeming features, they would call out, "Chestnut!" "Oh, give us a rest!" If an involved sentence was read, the cry was, "Guide wanted!" If the sentences were incorrect grammatically, they would call, "Oh, what are you giving us?" If the wrong word was used, the correct one would be suggested. If the treatment of the subject was dry and uninteresting, the boys would groan, pretend to snore, call "Oh, my!" "Wake me up!" If the composition was monotonously long, their comment was, "Cut it off!" If too many things were discussed, they said, "Good for three; don't be so extravagant!" meaning of course that there was material for three compositions.

The instructor realized that he might be criticised for permitting the use of slang in class work. The remarks of the boys may be regarded as inane efforts at a sickly sort of humor, instead of a sincere attempt to point out mistakes for the benefit of all concerned. Not willing to decide the matter by theory, he permitted this class to continue its comments in its own

phrases; but another class was required to express its criticisms in standard English without slang. After one month, he allowed both classes to use legitimate slang, for he found that in this way only would the class keep up a spontaneous, interesting criticism. Of course, slang phrases of unusual vagueness and indelicacy were excluded. He tried to point out the legitimate use of slang, and required the boys in their compositions to distinguish all the slang phrases used by inclosing them in quotation marks. But not more than one composition in a hundred contained slang. In the examination papers of the courses in literature he refused to accept slang, even when appropriate. For instance, in a test on Byron's *Childe Harold*, he asked: "Do you like one canto more than the others? If so, why?" Some of the boys preferred the first canto because of the bull fight; others preferred the third because of the battle of Waterloo; and a few preferred the fourth because it was the last. The instructor was compelled to mark only one answer "deficient," and that was: "All coons look alike to me."

It became clear, therefore, that to gain the best results it was necessary to secure the boys' participation in the criticism. While the boys might be indifferent to the suggestions of the instructor, they were always obliged to listen to the voice of the class. A boy would rarely repeat a fault which the class had criticised. A friendly rivalry was created; the boy who had been criticised watched closely to detect faults in the work of his critics. Consequently the entire class was alert and interested, and the few comments which the teacher interjected fell on open ears. However, the class left little for him to comment upon, except spelling, punctuation, and neatness. While individual boys might give faulty and incomplete criticisms, the criticism of the whole class was usually very accurate and thorough. In this hour the instructor became better acquainted with his class than in the other four hours of his work with it during the week. It was also restful and entertaining. Only once was he compelled to resort to disciplinary measures to keep order in the room. Several times he was very much amused at the personal criticism contained in the compositions. Once in par-

ticular, as he was reading them aloud in regular order, he was astonished to read as the first sentence: "What would you think if a young rattle-brained college graduate came to your school and made you write an essay each week?" Naturally this took his breath; he checked his first impulse to laugh, for he wondered whether such a breach of decorum would ruin the discipline of the class. Yet it was too good to stand punishment. Without raising his eyes, he read the sentence aloud again slowly and carefully. After a pause he took his glasses out of their case, rubbed them carefully, and, putting them on, read the sentence a third time. All this time there was absolute quiet in the room; the asthmatic breathing of a boy on the second row was the only sound. Then the instructor looked up slowly from the paper and deliberately stared at the writer, who sat a few seats away, much embarrassed and frightened. After a long stare, the instructor quietly winked at the boy and then smiled. A laugh of relief broke from the class. Thereafter that class was the best-behaved class that came to him.

For larger classes the method was very different. For the first few weeks the instructor would read compositions aloud and criticise them as he read, to the whole class. Sometimes the boys read their own compositions aloud. With a class of one hundred boys it was impossible to read all the compositions during the hour. With such large classes his method was to wait until each boy had handed in four compositions; then the instructor would call up to his desk the first boy in the class, and look over all four of his compositions, paying strict attention to the errors common to all. Meantime the second boy had taken his compositions from the drawer, unfolded them, and arranged them in regular order, so that all of the instructor's time might be given to criticism. In this way each boy received a personal criticism of all his compositions once a month; for the instructor could read and grade four compositions of one boy in the time it took for two compositions of separate boys. In fact, this was the only method by which it was possible for him to criticise and grade the weekly compositions of a class of three hundred boys, whom he met in sections of one hundred only one hour a week.

Once, at the suggestion of the president of the school, he tried to lighten the work by correcting only every fifth composition of each boy. The boys soon lost interest; they wished to know how they were doing, to see their mistakes. At last it was discovered that some of the boys were copying over and handing in old compositions. They needed to know that every bit of their work was examined.

It was also suggested that the boys might correct each other's work. This was found impracticable, because the boys were not skilled enough in detecting errors when working alone, and because it caused too much commotion. Besides, to grade the papers, they had to be gone over again by the instructor. Such a method, moreover, seemed wrong in principle; for students should be prevented, not only from making errors, but from seeing them. Constant reading of mistakes leads to making mistakes, as the instructor learned to his regret.

With these large sections his work was personally discouraging and exhausting, for it was impossible to come into as close contact with each boy as work in composition demands. For lectures on literary movements and the lives of authors and readings from their works, small sections may be profitably combined into a large class. But for composition work, large classes should be split up into small sections, for the detailed individual work, which has proved by far the most effective.

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